



Pick Your Path to Health

Dealing with Depression and Other Mental Illness

Nike Jackson has always been, in her own words, "a person who wants to take care of things." However, during her last year of graduate school, things started to change. Nike started to notice how "difficult" it was to do even the simple things. She didn't want to pay her bills. She had to really force herself to get up and go to class and to go to work. She became more and more tired each day until all she wanted to do was to stay home and sleep. Nike was showing typical signs of depression.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, depression is one of the most common forms of mental problems for women. Over 12 million women in this country are diagnosed with depression every year. The other major mental illnesses are anxiety, bipolar (or manic-depressive) disorder, and schizophrenia.

More Than Just The Blues

You are probably familiar with depression. Most likely you have probably had periods of sadness or feeling blue at some point in your life. This is normal and to be expected, especially during stressful periods in your life, such as when a loved one passes away or your home is destroyed by fire or other major, life-changing situations. But the difference between feeling sad or blue for a few days or weeks and that of a serious mental health problem is in how much these feelings or symptoms affect your everyday life.

Psychiatrist Edward Zinn of McLean, Virginia, notes "there are degrees of depression or any mental illness. Some people can function well and their symptoms are mild to moderate. Others experience more serious symptoms that interfere with work, family, relationships, and leisure activities. It's when you can't go to work, or you are so anxious that you are afraid to leave your home, or are constantly worried with your thoughts and feelings that really sends up a red flag that this is serious and won't just go away on its own."

Sooner is Better

Although African American women are less likely than their other female counterparts to have depression, when they do suffer from depression, it's more likely to be severe. "Black women don't lend themselves to treatment

as promptly. In my experience, I've seen that Black women suffer longer, needlessly more than white women. Getting treatment sooner is important. It can help there be less disruption in your life," reports Dr. Zinn. This resistance to seek early treatment for mental health problems may be due in part to cultural attitudes about mental health issues in the African American community. Some think of a mental problem as a sign of weakness, not a medical illness. In addition, African American women may not find the medical community welcoming or understanding of the particular stressors that they face everyday.

"I kept thinking it would get better. But it didn't," says Nike. "I had a friend who kept telling me about her mother who suffered from depression and was suggesting I also get help. But I didn't want to see a psychiatrist or take medicine. But I knew I needed to do something. I never felt like that before in my life—never."

Depression or any other mental illness can be very frightening to the person experiencing it, as well as for their loved ones. As Nike puts it, "at least with a physical pain you can say, my arm hurts and as difficult as it is to describe a physical problem, it's more difficult to describe your actual feelings and it can be embarrassing. You want help, but you don't know why you're thinking what you're thinking and are sort of afraid to tell them (doctors) everything you're thinking because you don't want to be thought of as crazy."

But depression, and other mental disorders should be thought about as any other illness. Here are some signs of depression:

- Not able to sleep or sleeping too much
- Having a poor appetite or eating too much
- Crying spells
- Feelings of low self-esteem or low self-worth
- Having low energy or being tired all the time
- Getting angry a lot
- Having extreme irritability
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Not being able to do things you need to do every day—go to work, take care of yourself, your family

Steps to Recovering

If you or a family member or friend have any of these symptoms for more than a few weeks, seek help or try to help that person to take steps to recovery.

1. **Go to your doctor.** Let her know how you're feeling. The doctor will help you rule out other physical ailments that may have these symptoms as well.
2. **Reduce any stressors in your life.** Depression or other mental health problems are usually brought on by some sort of stressor—death of a loved one; overworking; financial problems. Reduce unnecessary stressors and try to keep your life simple.
3. **Have a support system in place.** Get support from family, friends, or community. Talk to them about what's going on with you. Sometimes just talking and having someone acknowledge what you're going through can be healing.
4. **Be open to different kinds of treatment.** Everyone is different and responds to different kinds of treatments. You may or may not need medication. But if you do, it's okay. It's a sign of strength to take care of yourself.
5. **Know what resources are available to you.** If your insurance doesn't pay for mental health services, seek assistance from your community health center which usually has reduced fees for services; talk to counselors who tend to cost much less than psychologists or psychiatrists; speak with your local clergy or pastor; look for local support groups.
6. **Become informed.** Get information on mental health and resources available from the National Institute of Mental Health, NIMH Public Inquiries, 6001 Executive Boulevard, Rm. 8184, MSC 9663, Bethesda, MD 20892-9663, Voice (301) 443-4513; Fax (301) 443-4279, TTY (301) 443-8431.

Seven months after her depression began, Nike Jackson is back on track with her life. She is no longer on medication and will graduate with her Master's in Public Health in the summer. "I'm very lucky and blessed. I had the support of my family, even though they didn't understand it, they supported me. But going to a counselor was good for me. Other women shouldn't be afraid of being stigmatized or thought of as crazy. It's like any other kind of illness. At first I couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel—but there is one."

Depression does not have to control your life. There is hope and help to help you get back on the path to a healthier, happier life.

For additional information and resources on dealing with mental illness and other health issues:

- The National Women's Health Information Center, www.4woman.gov, 1-800-994-WOMAN [9662]
- National Institute of Mental Health, www.nimh.nih.gov, 301- 443-4513
- National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, www.nami.org, 1-800-950-NAMI [6264]

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."